

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L CAIRO 0443

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SUBJECT: MINE CLEARANCE IN SUEZ CANAL

1. CHEF OF REQUIREMENTS SECTION, WAR MINISTRY, GENERAL AHMED ZAYD, ASKED SOME 20 COMMERCIAL ATTACHES FROM VARIOUS EMBASSIES (INCLUDING US, UK, FRG, FRANCE, USSR, ETC.) TO MEET WITH HIM AT SUEZ CANAL AUTHORITY JANUARY 26 TO DISCUSS URGENT EGYPTIAN INTEREST IN MINE CLEARANCE IN SUEZ CANAL AREA. REPRESENTATIVES OF EGYPTIAN NAVY AND SUEZ CANAL AUTHORITY WERE PRESENT: EDMONDS ATTENDED FOR USINT.

2. ZAYD INVITED "BIDS AND OFFERS" FROM THE GOVERNMENTS REPRESENTED AT MEETING OR PRIVATE FIRMS TO ASSIST IN CLEARING OF MINES, BOTH MAGNETIC AND INDUCTIVE, UNEXPLODED BOMBS AND ARTILLERY SHELLS, IN THE TWO APPROACHES TO THE CANAL AS WELL AS ALONG CANAL BANKS. ALTHOUGH EGYPTIAN NAVY HAS UNDERTAKEN TO SWEEP ALL WATERS, INCLUDING APPROACHES, AND EGYPTIAN NAVY OFFICERS PRESENT INDICATED THEY HAD NO NEED FOR ANY ASSISTANCE IN THIS REGARD, ZAYD FRANKLY ADMITTED THAT EGYPTIAN MILITARY LACKS EQUIPMENT OR TECHNICIANS CAPABLE OF

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LOCATING EXPLOSIVES WHICH MAY HAVE BEEN ANCHORED UNDER

BANKS AND IN THE BED OF THE CANAL. ZAYD EMPHASIZED THAT TIME IS AN ESSENTIAL FACTOR. NO WORK ON BROADER SUEZ CANAL CLEARANCE COULD BE UNDERTAKEN, INCLUDING SALVAGE OR REOPENING OF CANAL, UNTIL THIS PRELIMINARY STAGE IS COMPLETED. HE EXPLAINED THAT EGYPTIAN REPRESENTATIVES PRESENT WERE ACTING SOLELY IN A TECHNICAL CAPACITY, AND THAT FINAL DECISION WOULD BE MADE BY "HIGHER AUTHORITY," PRESUMABLY ALSO WEIGHING POLITICAL FACTORS OF ANY OFFER. SCA IS READY TO ANSWER ANY TECHNICAL QUESTIONS THAT MAY ARISE. IN ANSWER TO A SPECIFIC QUERY, ZAYD SAID BIDS OR OFFERS COULD COME FROM EITHER MILITARY OR CIVILIAN SECTORS.

3. COMMENT: WE HAVE HAD SOME EARLIER INDICATION THAT EGYPTIANS HAD APPROACHED BRITISH AND PERHAPS OTHERS TO ASSIST IN MINE CLEARING OPERATIONS. GOE CURRENTLY ENVISAGES SUEZ CANAL CLEARANCE AND REOPENING TO REQUIRE AT LEAST THREE SEPARATE ACTIONS: (A) MINE CLEARANCE, (B) SHIP SALVAGE AND REMOVAL, AND (C) DREDGING. IT IS CONTRACTING SEPARATELY FOR EACH OF THESE THREE SEGMENTS, ALTHOUGH CONCEIVABLY THE ENTIRE OPERATION OR TWO SEGMENTS COULD BE HANDLED BY ONE CONTRACTOR. HOWEVER, MINE CLEARANCE IS CLEARLY PRELIMINARY REQUIREMENT TO SECOND AND THIRD SEGMENTS.

4. IN THIS CONNECTION, WE UNDERSTAND THAT WEST GERMAN/ YUGOSLAV DISCUSSIONS WITH GOE ABOUT SUEZ SALVAGE HAVE STALLED ON TWO POINTS: FIRST, CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH INSURANCE COULD BE PAID IF THE FIRM'S EQUIPMENT IS DAMAGED OR PERSONNEL INJURED BY EXPLODING MINES REMAIN UNSETTLED; SECOND, SO IS TIME CLAUSE FOR CANAL CLEARANCE. WEST GERMANS CONTEND CLEARANCE JOB IS NOT TECHNICALLY FEASIBLE IN FOUR MONTHS, AS STIPULATED BY EGYPTIANS, BECAUSE OF PROBLEMS OF MINES UNDER WATER AND ALONG BANKS WHICH THE EGYPTIANS ACKNOWLEDGE THEY ARE NOT CAPABLE OF REMOVING THEMSELVES. WE UNDERSTAND FROM BRITISH NAVY ATTACHE THAT EGYPTIAN NAVY HAS ONLY ONE OPERATIONAL MINE SWEEPER AT PRESENT, WHICH IS NOT ENOUGH FOR THE JOB.

5. ALTHOUGH ZAYD'S INVITATION WAS NOT SPECIFICALLY
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DIRECTED TO ANYONE, AND WAS CAST AS WANTING "BIDS AND OFFERS," WE SUSPECT GOE MAY BE OBLIQUELY ANGLING FOR SOME USG ASSISTANCE IN MINE CLEARING. WE DO NOT KNOW MAGNITUDE OF PROBLEM IN TERMS OF POSSIBLE NUMBERS OR TYPES OF MINES ISRAELIS MAY HAVE SOWN, BUT ASSUME THIS TYPE OF INFORMATION COULD BE OBTAINED IF USG INTERESTED. TO THE EXTENT THAT USG FAVORS EXPEDITIOUS NORMALIZATION OF THE SUEZ CANAL AREA AS MEANS OF DEFUSING TENSION,

IT MAY BE IN OUR INTEREST TO OFFER TO ASSIST. THIS TYPE OF OPERATION COULD BE PERFORMED BY US NAVY, WHICH PRESUMABLY HAS NECESSARY EQUIPMENT AND EXPERTISE READILY AVAILABLE IN SIXTH FLEET. ALTERNATIVELY, IF USG INVOLVEMENT NOT DESIRED, DEPARTMENT MAY KNOW OF AN AMERICAN FIRM CAPABLE OF PERFORMING THIS KIND OF WORK WHICH MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN TENDERING ON THE JOB.

6. PLEASE ADVISE ASAP DEPT'S REACTION TO ABOVE.

7. SINCE WRITING ABOVE, I UNDERSTAND BRITISH EMBASSY IS URGING HMG OFFER ROYAL NAVY ASSISTANCE AND HAS ALREADY HAD A NUMBER OF TALKS WITH EGYPTIAN OFFICIALS ON THE SUBJECT. I AM PAYING CALL ON BRITISH AMBASSADOR TOMORROW MORNING AND WILL ASK HIM ABOUT LIKELIHOOD HMG OFFERING DO JOB. IF BRITISH ARE PREPARED TO DO IT, THIS WOULD SEEM PERFECTLY SATISFACTORY FROM OUR VANTAGE POINT. EILTS

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